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A Conversation with George Lucas

By RICHARD CORLISS

Movie history can be divided, without much forcing of the issue, into two eras: before *Star Wars* and after. The landscape before the first *Star Wars* film, in 1977, was a very different terrain. The best Hollywood directors, freed from censorship and the nagging sense that they were cranking out movies while their European brethren were hand-crafting films, had begun to forge a distinctive adult American cinema. Few thought in terms of box office megamillions. The idea was to earn enough to entice someone into financing your next

picture. (Jean-Luc Godard had done this successfully in France in the 60s; Robert Altman adopted that model for his pioneering 70s works.) Most films by the most gifted Americans were present-day dramas that picked at some social scab until, in the last reel, it burst.

In the larger marketplace, the most popular films were the ones that were made for everyone, and that everyone wanted to see once: you, your kids, your mom. That's the broad, if thin, constituency that made blockbusters out of *The Love Bug*, *Airport*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, *The Godfather*, *The Sting*—and *Jaws*, by Lucas' contemporary Steven Spielberg. The majority of these pictures made their money slowly, playing first runs, then gradually reaching the smaller towns and theaters; the theatrical life of one of these crowd-pleasers might be a full year. There were genre movies, of course, but not many science-fiction films. Those were kids' stuff; movies of the 70s were for adults. Besides, special effects weren't sophisticated enough to open viewers' eyes to the fantasy worlds its makers might be dreaming. Even *Jaws*, which broke a few rules by opening in a thousand or so theaters, and by reviving the monster-from-the-deep subgenre of Atomic Age s-f, was bound to rely for its special effects on a hydraulically operated shark that kept short-circuiting off the coast of Martha's Vineyard waters.

Star Wars changed everything. It quickly became the top-grossing movie in the 65-year history of feature films (replacing *The Sound of Music*, if you need evidence of how much things had changed). With its then-wizardly special effects, and the cheerleading use to which they were put, it cued a revival of the s-f genre, which had been a B-movie fad in the 50s. Back then, the kids who gorged on s-f were a Saturday matinee minority. *Star Wars* arrived just as teen culture was taking over movies. Lucas' film proved that a movie could be a smash by creating a textural density that lured a part of the audience back through the wickets a dozen times. This wasn't your uncle's, and aunt's, hit movie; but if they didn't get it, who cared? The kids (mostly boys) were pouring all their disposable income into return visits. Thus *Star Wars* became the first cult-movie megahit.

and the first live-action movie to franchise its popularity into merchandising at a level that equaled, and then surpassed, the Disney cartoon features. (That revenue, not Lucas' share of the film's take, was what made him a billionaire.) and the first Hollywood epic, at least so far as I know, that was conceived as a trilogy—proof of Lucas' capacious vision and audacious entrepreneurial reach. AND, as Lucas mentioned in an interview I had with him two weeks ago in preparation for this week's TIME story on the future of movies, *Star Wars* was one of the hits whose profits, shared by the theater owners, financed the multiplexing of America.

The light-saber epic changed Lucas too. A graduate of the USC film school who also felt a kinship with Bruce Conner, Scott Bartlett and other members of San Francisco's vital avant-garde scene, he had made two features before *Star Wars*. In 1971 he hatched the stainless-steel-cool, *THX1138*—a project received by its sponsors at Warner Bros. with so much bafflement and meddling that it stirred in Lucas a resolve to be a truly independent filmmaker. In 1973 he moved to the middle with *American Graffiti*, a feel-good blast of instant-nostalgia (it re-imagined a California car culture only a decade in the past). The two works were, respectively, boldly European-ish and familiarly humanist. They hardly hinted at the Empire Lucas would create on film, or the empire he would build in Marin County.

Out of *Star Wars* came Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), his computerized effects company, and THX, the advanced sound system for theaters, and a little studio, specializing in digital

animation, that became Pixar. (Lucas sold that one to fellow visionary capitalist Steve Jobs.) The film's triumph also allowed him to become his own mogul, essentially renting later episodes to 20th Century Fox, rather than working for hire. Most surprising, perhaps, was Lucas' fidelity to the fantasy world he'd dreamed up. He could have gone back, or on, to making the gnarly little independent movies he has talked about, to increasingly incredulous listeners, for 35 years. Yet he has extended the original *Star Wars* trilogy not just to the three episodes he made in the past decade but to an Ewoks TV show and, now, a *Star Wars* cartoon series for cable TV and a rerelease of all six chapters in 3D. He is a father who feels obliged to raise the children he sired. Luke and Anakin...

...and Indiana Jones, another Saturday matinee hero, the icon of the three-film collaboration with Spielberg that promises another installment one of these years. He's also preparing a DVD release of the *Young Indiana Jones* TV series, with a one-hour documentary on the subject of each episode.

At 61, a man with so much past could be pardoned for not paying much attention to the future. Lucas refers to himself as "retired"—meaning, he explains, he has no more *Star Wars* movies to make. Yet, as these excerpts from our two-hour phone conversation indicate, he has thought a lot about where the medium is going, or where it ought to go. He wants the movie industry to move at the pace his mind does: warp speed.

I'm a 19th century guy when it comes to technology, so before plugging a tape recorder into my office phone I asked Lynne Hale, Lucas' indefatigably cheerful and helpful Director of Communications, to record the interview on her end too. It happened that, on both sides, a few minutes were lost. I'm amused that neither the world's largest media company nor the galaxy's preeminent group of movie futurists could pull off recording the entire conversation. But, as you'll see, there was enough left on the tape to give you a peek into the mind of Lucas Skywalker. —R..C.

HOW BIG MOVIES MAKE LITTLE MOVIES

Richard Corliss: Let's talk about the effect *Star Wars* had on movie studios and theater owners—how a big hit can create low-budget hits.

George Lucas: It was the money from *Star Wars* and *Jaws* that allowed the theaters to build their multiplexes, which allowed an opening up of screens. The money that *Star Wars* made, half of it goes to the theater owners. The theater owners said, "Let's do some expansion. Let's build this idea of a multiplex," which was sort of floating around. So they started building multiplexes, they had all these screens, they needed to fill them. So all the little Miramaxses came up and said, "We'll help you fill those." And they started doing that. And those companies were able to start making some money, and so then more people were doing it, and then the studios were saying, "Gee if we can get a movie for ten million, it's not a big investment, let's start a little company that does nothing but distribute little movies."

THE DOYEN OF DIGITAL

R.C. The cost of making movies is going to go way way way down because of digital. It allows more people to get into the process, which makes cinema more democratic. It's more

like literature or painting, where anybody can do it if they have the talent—it's not this huge impossible economic barrier.

G.L. The problem is, Making a big movie, a *Harry Potter* or a *Spider-man*, you're spending \$20 to \$30 million for the prints, just to strike them and ship them to the theaters. Smaller movies have to spend a huge part of their budgets on prints. Now, if you don't have to spend any money on prints, and all you have to do is spend some money on advertising, and you're willing to look at different alternative ways of advertising, like *The Blair Witch Project* did, then you have access. You can go directly to the theater and say "Hey I got a movie. Will you book this for three weeks?" And the theater doesn't have any costs involved.

R.C. You had an idea for sharing the cost of conversion to digital distribution with the exhibitors...

G.L. It costs about \$1,200 for a print and about \$200 for a digital print. So what you do is charge the distributor the same \$1,200 they would ordinarily be charged, and \$1,000 of it goes into a pot that eventually pays for all the projectors and everything. In about five years you would basically reconvert the entire industry.

R.L. And who bought in?

G.L. No one's bought in yet. But they will. It's just a matter of time.

R.C. But the switchover would cost hundreds of millions of dollars. [More like \$4 billion, actually.]

G.L. But that's like: the Internet's been invented, now I'm not going to use it until I can figure out how I can own it. Well, you can't. It doesn't work that way. This is a new world; it doesn't work the way the old world worked.

They're trying to work it out. But now it's a matter of greed and control, who's going to control this. One of the real problems has been that everybody's trying to figure out a way to control everything. And they're afraid that some outsider is going to come in and try to control it. And it has nothing to do with making movies or showing movies or anything. It has to do with trying to be greedy and control it.

R.C. And who will get rich making the projectors?

G.L. Everybody. There's a whole group of people that make the projectors.

R.C. The makers of the equipment are not the ones who are complaining.

G.L. No, it's the studios and the theater owners. Each one is vying to see if they can better their position with each other. And they shouldn't. What they should be doing is saying how can we make this a better process for everybody, and especially for the audience. How can we streamline it so we all win. But no, they want to—it's one of the problems we have in this system we've created called win at all costs. And the idea of cooperating and everybody wins is not in the cards.

DAY AND DATE

R.C. There's been a lot of talk about day-and-date: releasing a movie on DVD or in video stores at the same time it opens in theaters. Do you think audiences will go to theaters if they can buy the movie for the same price and play it at home with a half-dozen friends?

G.L. It's supply and demand. It's not going to work that way, it's simply going to be, the theater's going to have to do a lot of work and spend a lot of money, they're going to be competing with day and date, and that's inevitable. It doesn't have anything to do with DVDs, it has to do with online. So eventually it'll all be online, eventually it'll all just be downloaded into a server, and it will be cheap so that they can compete with—that's the only way you're going to beat pirates, that is the only way because you can already download anything you want and it goes to the pirates instantly. The day it's released.

R.C. So why will people go to the movies?

G.L. Because it's a social experience. Sure, you can see a movie at home, the way can read a book. You can do it at home on your little laptop. But a lot of people go because it's a social experience. It's like watching a football game. Who in the world would go out in 20-below weather, and sit there and watch a football game where you can barely see the players? Football games are on TV, and it doesn't effect stadium attendance at all. It's the same with movies. People who really love movies and like to go out on a Saturday night will go to the movie theater. If you haven't built a fan-base or you're not selling something that people want, then the attendance is going to drop. But if you have a good product that you're putting into the theater, then they're going to always go there.

BIG SCREEN, LITTLE SCREEN

R.C. Movies are seen in theaters, on big and small screens at home and, now, on iPods. How do you compose a frame when you know that the image might be seen on a 60-foot screen or a three-inch screen?

G.L. I compose it for the big screen, I don't worry about the little screen. Even when we did our TV series (*Young Indiana Jones*), I said, 'Make this as if it were going into a big theater', because I knew that eventually the screens would be rather large. And movies work great on television. Yeah, it's a smaller screen. Yeah, you don't get the full scope of *Lawrence of Arabia* on a small screen. But you still understand it. And it's still just as emotional. Eventually, screens are going to get much bigger at home, and then *Lawrence of Arabia* will have that effect. It won't have the effect of sitting around in a theater, where it's just overwhelming—but that's why people are going to go to movies. Because there's that kind of experience that they can get in the movie theaters that they'll never be able to get at home, no matter how big they make the screens for the home.

I am a giant proponent of giant screens. But I accept the fact that most of my movies are going to be seen on phones. Because that's what's going to happen. People can get whatever they want out of it on a phone. If they do, then that's great. I don't recommend it, but I certainly don't say don't do that. Because people have a right to do whatever they want to do, and see it under whatever conditions. But if you really love films, and you really want to get the full impact, there's a huge difference between watching something on a small screen

with a mediocre sound system and watching it on a giant screen in a giant theater with a huge beautiful sound system. I mean the difference is electric.

2D, 3D

R.C. Do you think audiences are so technically sophisticated now that they know the difference between formats? Virtually every CGI animated feature has been a much bigger hit than any non-CGI over the last ten years. Is that just a coincidence or a better story?

G.L. What happened with Pixar is they made brilliantly creative movies, but they looked different. They had a different quality about them than on television, than *Rugrats*. When you see a 3D movie, you assume it's a higher-quality movie and it's something you don't see on television. Now the television show I'm working on, the *Star Wars* television show, is 3D.

R.C. When you said you were going to do *Star Wars* in 3D, do you mean in the old-fashioned 3D?

G.L. Yeah, with glasses and everything.

R.C. Did you think of this when you were making the movies?

G.L. No, no, no. I had no idea. And that's what makes it great. There's a difference, because it used to be a cheap trick, which is you had a 3D movie. Now it's a movie, but it happens to be in 3D. It's just a 3-Dimensional way of looking at a movie that doesn't call attention to itself, it just works. And the quality is higher. I was very much against 3D until I saw this new process and said, hey, this actually works in a way that it should work, which is it doesn't call attention to itself, you forget that you're watching in 3D, it's just a nicer process.

R.C. I have to say that when I saw *Spy Kids 3D*, the glasses kept slipping down my nose.

G.L. Well, now they've got better glasses.

RENEGADE AND RETRO

R.C. Try this one on: *Star Wars* was pioneering in its technology but retro in its content. In the movies that you and I saw when we were growing up, movies were trying to be adult. And one of the things that *Star Wars* did was validate the Saturday-matinee impulse in filmmakers—which meant that there were a lot fewer exciting films by the best filmmakers that were made for adults.

G.L. Well, I don't agree with that. Because if you look at the Academy Awards, and the top ten lists of the critics, every single year there are some amazing, artistic adult movies. And they've always been that way ever since the very beginning.

R.C. I mean that Godard, Bergman, Fellini, they were stretching film form. Adult movies now are adult in content: the equivalent of the Elia Kazan movies of the 50s.

G.L. Well, I would consider Kazan movies adult. And the movies up for Academy Awards this year, I would consider those adult.

R.C. They're adult in content. The idea of pioneering form is not so important.

G.L. The experimental side of things, the experiment in form, happened in the 20s with Eisenstein and the other Russians did a lot of experimenting. In the 60s, you did get a lot of experimentation, especially here in San Francisco with Bruce Connor and all those guys. But it was too far out of the mainstream. And in the end the foreign film industries wanted to do what America was doing. They wanted to have their movies seen all over the world, they wanted audiences to love them. And to do that, you can't be too experimental, because most people aren't going to be attracted to that. They're going to be attracted to storytelling—storytelling in a way that they're used to. Today, some of the experimentation comes in music videos and commercials and TV show. But that will eventually spill over into movies.

The area I'm interested in now is to go do some form-experimenting—to try and figure out different ways of telling movies. I grew up in the Godard, Fellini world and all that. To me that's where my heart is. But I realize that's not commercial. That's why I can say I managed to do something that everybody wants to do—all those guys wanted to do—which was to get a pile of money so I can sort of waste it, burn through it. It's like a government subsidy, which is what (the Europeans) were able to deal with. I have my own little government subsidy that I've built myself, and now I can go and do stupid things with it. I mean, I'm old enough and I'm kind of retired...

R.C. What do you mean, you're kind of retired?

G.L. In that I don't have to do *Star Wars* anymore. I don't have to make money any more. I can just waste it. I call it hobby filmmaking, where you just get to do what you want to do, and you don't have to worry about what anyone thinks about it.

R.C. So you're finally going to make good on your promise to do your own little movies?

G.L. Yeah, after the TV series, I'm going to do my own little movies. The stuff I'm thinking about it has to do with pushing the vocabulary in the medium. Basically, you have to accept the fact that it's going to be the land of *THX* (the movie), and worse.

R.C. But having an idea, making a movie—going from notion to release in a couple of months—that simply doesn't happen any more, right? You can't follow that kind of impulse.

G.L. I'm not saying I'm going to make these features fast, I mean, I ruminate a lot and sit around. I'm one of these guys that come back and paint a little and then go back and paint a little bit more and come back a month later and paint a little bit more. I don't do things particularly quickly. I do when there's money involved, because I just can't afford to spend the money. And I will probably try to get this money to last as long as I possibly can, which means these are going to be reasonably low-budget movies. But I can try ideas out that I wanted to try out when I started. I'm more interested in the avant-garde underground kind of moviemaking—where you go to your uncle or somebody and ask for the money. They were making movies for \$2,000.

R.C. You have a few dollars.

G.L. Yeah, I have a few dollars, but when you're getting up to the point where the average movie costs \$80 million, anything under \$20 million is pretty cheap. Anything under \$10 million is almost impossible. And anything under \$5 million is Roger Corman.

INDY 4

R.C. If you're retired, I guess you'll be less involved with an *Indiana Jones 4* than you were in the first three?

G.L. Well, I've been working on Indy 4 for ten years. So I've been more involved, so no matter how you count it on this one I'll be more involved than I'll have ever been on the other three put together. It's taken forever to get a script of it. That's my part of it.

R.C. Isn't Harrison Ford now older than Sean Connery was when he played his father in *Indiana Jones* and the *Last Crusade*?

G.L. Uhh, yeah. But the thing is designed for that. And I think it's funny, it's exciting. You know the problem there, which is not a problem, is that we don't have to make that movie. All we can do is hurt ourselves, all it's going to do is get criticized. I mean it's basically *Phantom Menace* we're making. No matter how you do it, no matter what you do, it won't be what the other ones were in terms of the impact or the way people remember them.

R.C. But there's also no need to complete the holes in the epic.

G.L. We don't have anything like that. We just had a great time making those movies. And if we can have a great time doing this one and we can enjoy ourselves, and make something that's entertaining to us, no matter what the world thinks, let's just do it.

R.C. But you also have to decide on the format, right?

G.L. In terms of what?

R.C. Do you say, "Dammit, Steven, do it in digital," and he says, "Dammit, George, I'm doing it on film"?

G.L. Pretty much.

R.C. Who wins?

G.L. He'll win. He's the director. The great thing about working with Steven is that we don't have agendas. We want to make the best movie possible, I want him to be happy. If he wants to shoot it on film and cut it on a Movieola... Hey, he's got a great editor. Michael Kahn can cut faster on a Movieola than anybody can cut on an Avid. And I don't really care. But I do tell him, 'This is your chance to play with this and experiment with it and blame it

all on me'—say, 'He made me do it.' And then you can go back to film if you want. But he has relented after all these years to maybe cutting it digitally. We'll see what happens.

FAVORITE TOYS

R.C.What's the next big thing in home gizmos?

G.L. The things they're going to be selling are larger servers, storage units. That will be the next big thing you buy to put in your house. Now, with TiVo, it goes into a mysterious server somewhere. But this is actually going to be in your house, your server, and anything you want to download and store there, like a safe, is just going to be stored there. It's just going to be huge. It's not going to be like what they have now.

R.C.And a movie downloaded from such a storage unit has the same quality as a DVD?

G.L. It's actually better. That's where Hi-Def is going to run into problems, Because you can download it off your hi-def internet line and you don't have to worry about Blue Ray or all this competition that they're going to be fighting over for the next few years. You can just do it. And play it.

R.L. In the late 70s you started THX and Pixar and ILM to explore and exploit the new technologies. Have you started new companies to follow these particular technological dreams?

G.L. All of those things were designed really to make the process of making films easier and at the same time make the quality higher. Stanley Kubrick was doing that, too; he just didn't have a company. He did it himself. It's better to try and do it with a company and let your friends in on it, which is what I did. ILM was there because there were no real special effects companies at the time. I had a special effects movie and I needed to create one from scratch. The same thing with THX and everything else. But right now, and I don't think there are going to be companies, I mean I don't know exactly how we're going to exploit this.

Right now we're working on a Pre-Vis system, which is pre-visualization in movies. It's very quick, almost like a video game: you can make movies very quickly and shoot them and then put them together. It's just basically a moving storyboard, so it's very easy for you to figure out how your movie is going to get made, and what it's going to look like when it gets done. And it doesn't cost hardly anything. Any big movie all has pre-vis, which are computerized versions of the movie. But we can do that now without having the technicians there to do it. And if you're a Victorian like I am, you can handle it. Directors can just sit down like a writer and direct their movie on a desk.

A lot of directors are going to fight this. They're going to say, "Well, then, the studio's going to look at my movie and say, 'We want it done this way.'" But if you ignore the essential problem of the corporate overlords, it's actually a great way to make movies, because you can really see what your movie is, structurally, before you go out and shoot it. It's a great thing for anybody that's doing any kind of large movie. Because you have to do it anyway. I come out of documentary filmmaking, so I'm used to getting a lot of material and putting it

together that way. Steven is just the opposite. He's a guy who conceptualizes and storyboards it and shoots exactly what he needs. But I have to see it moving.

R.C. Spielberg still does storyboards?

G.L. Yes, on paper. I let him do some pre-vis on the last film, on *Sith*. And he loved it, and he did it on *War of the Worlds*. So he has accepted that part now because it's so much better.

We're also taking a more intuitive look at digital editing. I'm building a digital editing system which is much simpler. And it's got a different interface, it's got the kind of interface we had on edit-to-write, which is a different kind of controller that allows the editor to not have to think about what he's doing in terms of manipulating the machine, it just happens automatically.

R.C. So that's the brave new world, where the computer is your super-efficient, obedient servant.

G.L. Unfortunately, we live in a new world where all the fun things are gone. Everything is virtual.

My gratitude to Clayton Neuman, who quickly and accurately transcribed the long conversation. He's the Han Solo of this journalistic adventure. —R.C.